

Case Study of Sichuan-Chongqing Hip-Hop Songs: Code-Switching and Nativization from the World Englishes Perspective

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Abstract: This study examines code-switching and the nativization of English in Sichuan-Chongqing hip-hop from a World Englishes perspective. Analysis of 30 songs reveals that English is strategically embedded through inter/intra-sentential switching and undergoes phonetic, morphosyntactic, and semantic localization. This transforms English into a stylistic resource for expressing local identity within global hip-hop culture.

Keywords: World Englishes, Code-switching, Nativization, Sichuan-Chongqing Rap, Language Localization.

1. Introduction

In the digital age, language plays a key role in shaping identity and expressing culture. Sichuan-Chongqing rap has gained global popularity through its creative use of multiple languages, with artists switching between the local dialect, Mandarin, and English. This multilingualism is not just a stylistic choice but a way for local artists to express identification in a globalized context. English, in this setting, is localized and becomes a functional part of expression rather than a foreign element, aligning with the World Englishes framework where English adapts to local contexts.

Building on this framework, the case study examines code-switching and the localization of English in Sichuan-Chongqing rap. Focusing on lyrics by artists like Masiwei, it explores two questions: (1) How is English used in contemporary Sichuan-Chongqing rap? (2) What forms of linguistic localization appear in the lyrics? By analyzing code-switching patterns, the study shows how English serves as a marker of identity, offering a localized Chinese example that contributes to global discussions on English in popular culture.

2. World Englishes in Hip-Hop Music

The theory of World Englishes affirms the legitimacy of diverse English varieties and highlights the cultural meanings in their localized forms[1][2]. Kachru's "Three Circles Model" challenges the dominance of standard English by recognizing multiple variants[3]. This view has extended into popular culture, where English serves not just as a tool for communication but as a symbolic resource shaped by local identities[4]. Code-switching is key to this localization. Poplack identified three types: inter-sentential, intra-sentential, and tag-switching[5]. Gumperz saw code-switching as "contextualization cues" that convey social meaning[6], while Auer stressed the importance of interpreting it within specific conversational contexts[7].

In global hip-hop, code-switching has become important to identity performance and style. Alim describes youth communities as "trans-local style communities," using multilingualism to bridge local and global cultural flows[8]. Androutsopoulos and Pennycook similarly argue that English in music indexes not just globalization, but authenticity and

locality[9][10]. Within this theoretical framework, recent studies have explored how English is localized in Asian rap. Ruanglertsilp demonstrates that Thai English in rap exhibits phonological, syntactic, and cultural nativization, reflecting youth identification[11]. In China, Liu shows that dialect rap expresses marginal identities, with Higher Brothers using rapid code-switching to create "strategic unintelligibility"—a mix of Sichuan dialect, Mandarin, and English that asserts local identity while appealing globally[12][13]. Liu also note that English helps bypass tonal limits in Chinese rap, serving as a deliberate stylistic tool[14].

While these studies offer useful insights, research on English localization in the specific context of Sichuan-Chongqing rap remains limited. This paper addresses this gap by analyzing how English is structurally integrated and culturally embedded in lyrics where Sichuan dialect and Mandarin coexist, providing a localized case study for understanding the intersection of English and identification in contemporary Chinese popular music.

3. Analyzing English in Sichuan-Chongqing Hip-Hop

This study employs a qualitative research method to investigate code-switching and the potential nativization of English in Sichuan-Chongqing rap. It examines how English is embedded and localized within a predominantly Chinese linguistic context, contributing to identity construction in popular culture. By integrating textual analysis of lyrics with observations of language performance in digital contexts, the study explores the nativization of English in local genres from both structural and functional perspectives.

The corpus comprises 30 rap tracks released between 2018 and 2025. Specifically, 24 tracks were selected from The New Szechwan playlist on Apple Music—curated and regularly updated by user Sesi. An additional six high-profile songs were included to enhance coverage and analytical rigour. All lyrics were transcribed and linguistically annotated at the sentence level. English elements were identified and categorized by linguistic unit. Drawing on Auer's conversation-analytic framework, the study further investigates the pragmatic roles of English elements in conveying emotion, marking semantic contrast, and contributing to cultural styling. To evaluate the degree of

nativization, the analysis is grounded in World Englishes theory, focusing on five dimensions of localization. These dimensions facilitate the identification of phenomena characteristic of localized rap discourse.

All materials used in this research are publicly accessible and do not involve personal or sensitive information. Lyric excerpts are quoted with full contextual integrity, and ethical procedures adhere to the Ethical Guidelines of the British Association for Applied Linguistics (BAAL), ensuring lawful data use and academic transparency.

4. Patterns of Code-Switching

To systematically examine the features and variations of English in lyrics, this study performed a detailed manual analysis of 30 representative songs. Based on Ruanglertsilp's analytical framework, all English elements in the lyrics were identified, categorized, and coded. The results are presented across four dimensions: (1) the frequency and repetition of English elements; (2) the classification of word classes used in rap songs; (3) the nativized characteristics of English in songs; (4) the structural types of code-switching. These tables not only illustrate the patterns of English usage but also lay a foundation for subsequent theoretical analysis. The classification of code-switching types adheres to Poplack's (1980) structural typology.

Table 1. Frequency and Repetition of English Elements

Type	Occurrences	%	Repetitions	%
Word	101	21.26	38	23.60
Phrase	92	19.37	34	21.12
Clause	8	1.68	0	0
Sentence	274	57.68	89	55.28
Total	475	100	161	100

Examples of the code-switching can be observed in (1), (2), (3), (4) and (5), respectively.

(1)Lil mama 原谅我总是说你 bad 这是种 respect 别让我跪搓衣板

(2)成都 city where I'm from

(3)Chanel pearl 搭配我的 Fendi

(4) You see me like no other 所以 I'm cool with you

(5)Yeah, she wanna party 整晚的 party

As illustrated in Table 1, code-switching in these rap lyrics predominantly occurs at the sentence and word levels. Inter-sentential switching is the most prevalent, comprising 57.68% of all instances and exhibiting the highest repetition rate (55.28%). This indicates that artists often incorporate full English sentences in key sections, such as choruses, to enhance rhythm, create slogan-like resonance, and emphasize personal identification and emotional intensity. These sentences typically demonstrate strong repeatability and cultural portability, aligning with Pennycook's perspective on English as a global form of cultural performance.

Word-level usage ranks second, accounting for 101 instances (21.26%) with a repetition rate of 23.60%. These typically involve single lexical items-such as "swag," "Fendi," or "flow"-which are embedded into Chinese syntax to index style, persona, or brand consciousness. This reflects a distinct stylistic tendency at the lexical level. Phrase-level code-switching is also prevalent, comprising 92 instances (19.37%), and often includes fixed expressions like "shut up" or "don't play," functioning as discourse markers or rhythmic fillers. In contrast, clause-level switches are infrequent, occurring only

8 times (1.68%) without repetition, suggesting that more complex syntactic structures may be less compatible with the rhythmic and structural economy required in rap.

Overall, English use in these works is primarily characterized by complete sentences and individual words, indicating a dual strategy: full sentences are employed to mark rhetorical peaks, while high-frequency words function as stylistic tags. This pattern, which prioritizes performative over communicative functions, illustrates how English operates as a flexible stylistic resource in Chinese rap, supporting the World Englishes framework, which highlights the cultural reshaping of global English in local contexts.

The subsequent sections will further analyze the most frequently used words and explore their localized linguistic features (see Tables 2 and 3).

Table 2. Classification of Word Class Employed in Rap Songs

Word Class	Occurrences	Percentage
Noun	41	40.59
Verb	27	26.73
Adjective	12	11.88
Adverb	7	6.93
Filler	14	13.86
Total	101	100.00

As presented in Table 2, nouns constitute the most frequently used English word class, with 41 occurrences (40.59%), nearly half of all tokens. Their prominence reflects a lexical emphasis on objects and identity markers, as exemplified by common terms such as "money," "boss," "girl," and "trap," which index wealth, status, and social roles-central themes in the narrative construction of Sichuan-Chongqing rap. Verbs follow closely with 27 instances (26.73%), underscoring the genre's focus on action, attitude, and agency. Words like "flex," "shoot," and "play" encapsulate assertiveness and reinforce the proactive, self-affirming tone characteristic of rap discourse. But adjectives (11.88%) and adverbs (6.93%) appear less often. This shows descriptive words are not used as much. This may stem from rhythmic constraints and the need for concise delivery, making modifiers less compatible with the tempo and structure of rap. Notably, filler words such as "yo," "okay," and "yeah" appear 14 times (13.86%). It shows that these words play an important role in maintaining rhythm, managing tone, and enhancing performative fluency, reflecting rap's heightened sensitivity to prosody and musicality.

In conclusion, in Sichuan-Chongqing rap, English is mainly used through nouns and verbs, creating a style focused on reference and action. This enhances the lyrics' emotion and imagery. It reflects Alim's idea of "trans-local style communities," where language shapes local identity within global culture. It also supports Dovchin's view that popular culture styles emerge through repetition and stylization[15]. The word class patterns show how English is practically adapted to local rap contexts.

Table 3. Nativized English Characteristics of English in Songs

Feature	Occurrences	Percentage
phonological nativization	11	17.46
morphosyntactic fusion	23	36.51
cultural embedding	12	19.05
semantic shift	9	14.29
lexical innovation	8	12.70
Total	63	100

As illustrated in Table 3, English in Sichuan-Chongqing rap exhibits clear signs of localization. The most prevalent feature is morphosyntactic fusion (23 instances, 36.51%), where English words are embedded into Chinese syntax to create hybrid expressions such as “I swag 得很” or “他太 street.” This demonstrates flexible bilingual usage and aligns with Ruanglertsilp’s (2024) findings regarding structural integration in the localization of English in Thai rap songs.

Cultural embedding (12 instances, 19.05%) and phonological nativization (11 instances, 17.46%) underscore the aesthetic adaptation of English. For instance, the word “boss” acquires new meanings in local contexts (e.g., referring to the singer himself), while pronunciations are adjusted for rhyme and tone—such as “money” (/məni/) and “real” (/riəu/) being phonetically localized to fit Chinese rhythm.

Semantic shift (9 instances, 14.29%) illustrates how English words acquire new functions—for example, “play” meaning flirt, or “real” meaning loyal. Lexical innovation (8 instances, 12.70%) includes mixed forms like “trap 人” or “real 仔,” which signify group identity and creativity.

Overall, the localization of English in these lyrics spans phonology, grammar, meaning, and culture. This supports World Englishes theory, demonstrating how English is reshaped into a local stylistic resource, and highlights Chinese rappers’ active role in redefining global language within local cultural contexts.

Table 4. Structural Types of Code-switching

Type	Occurrences	Percentage
Inter-sentential	71	51.45
Intra-sentential	43	31.16
Tag-switching	27	19.57
Total	138	100

As presented in the table, among the 138 identified instances of English code-switching, inter-sentential switching is the most prevalent, occurring 71 times (51.45%). This indicates that Sichuan-Chongqing rappers frequently switch to English at the sentence level, particularly in hooks or opening lines, such as “I don’t care what they say” or “I’m on my way.” These complete sentences are employed to convey attitude, mark transitions, and enhance rhythm—supporting Androutsopoulos’ argument that sentence-level switching highlights identity and stylistic peaks, as well as Alim’s notion of language as a stylistic symbol in hip-hop.

Intra-sentential switching occurs 43 times (31.16%), typically in the form of English elements embedded within Chinese sentences—for example, “我 trap 到 sunrise” or

“flex 一下.” These instances reflect a high degree of syntactic integration and blurred language boundaries, showcasing the expressive flexibility of rap language.

Tag switching is less frequent (27 instances, 19.57%) but plays a distinct performative role. Words such as “yeah,” “okay,” and “yo” often appear at the beginning or end of lines, functioning to enhance rhythm, signal stance, or engage listeners. Although semantically minimal, these tags are crucial in setting tone and framing delivery—consistent with Gumperz’s understanding of their metalinguistic function.

Overall, English code-switching in Sichuan-Chongqing rap is predominantly characterized by inter- and intra-sentential forms, demonstrating that English serves not only as a content-bearing code but also as a rhetorical and stylistic device. These switching patterns illustrate how local artists navigate global and local codes, constructing a hybrid “rap linguascape” shaped by identity, rhythm, and cultural negotiation.

5. Conclusion

By examining code-switching patterns and localization features in 30 Sichuan-Chongqing rap songs, this study demonstrates how English is strategically and creatively embedded in Chinese rap. Rather than functioning as a high-status or authoritative code, English undergoes refunctionalization through phonetic, grammatical, and semantic adaptation, echoing Kachru’s concept of nativization. The findings further highlight the versatility of code-switching. The frequent incorporation of English—particularly at the sentence level—facilitates rhythmic flow, conveys identification, and signals alignment with global cultural trends. This resonates with Alim’s notion of “trans-local style communities,” illustrating how language serves as a site for cultural negotiation. Artists prioritize impact and symbolic tension over grammatical consistency, especially through inter-sentential switching and morphosyntactic fusion. More broadly, this study expands World Englishes research into non-institutional, youth-driven cultural spaces. It reveals how English acquires local legitimacy in informal, cross-linguistic contexts, aligning with Pennycook’s argument that localization entails symbolic reinvention rather than mere linguistic imitation. Sichuan-Chongqing rap thus provides a valuable lens on the processes of localization, stylization, and mobilization of English within China’s digital and popular culture landscape. It calls for further sociolinguistic investigation into code-switching and identity construction in non-mainstream and online domains shaped by global flows and local creativity.

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